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SUBJECT: STATUS OF OURE CASSONI REFUGEE CAMP -- MOVE SEEKS
INEVITABLE

REF: A. NDJAMENA 403

1B. NDJAMENA 446

NDJAMENA 00000447 001.4 OF 004

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) The refugee camp in northeastern Chad on the Chad-Sudan border known as Oure Cassoni appears slated to be moved away from the border. The GoC announced on 14 September that the camp had to move (reported Ref A), and has designated a new site for its location. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has not yet declared the proposed site to be viable for human habitation. Whether it does will depend on multiple factors, but the critical one is water availability from a sustainable hydrological formation sufficient to provide at least 15 liters per day per person for some 28,000 people in a harsh desert environment. Oure Cassoni's location only 5 kms from the border has been problematic since the camp's establishment in 2005. The site is highly politicized and militarized, and has long provided a rear base for Sudanese rebels. It is not at all certain that moving it to the location selected by the GoC will do much to improve the situation, although MINURCAT SRSG Victor Angelo has insisted that UN agencies will do what they can to ensure that a move does not exacerbate existing problems or provoke new ones. There is considerable speculation among humanitarians as to the motivations for making tens of thousands of people destroy what little they have built for themselves, in order to move 45 kms and start all over again. END SUMMARY.

THE PROBLEM

12. (SBU) Oure Cassoni camp was originally established as a temporary transit camp for refugees, predominantly of the Zaghawa ethnic group, fleeing conflict in Darfur in 2004-05. Its location only 5 kms from the Chad-Sudan border was instantly problematic: UNHCR norms are to push for camp locations at least 50 kms from borders to avoid camps becoming militarized, acting as rear bases for armed groups, and providing a source for recruits into the conflict on the other side of the border. The transit camp filled rapidly,

in a desert area of extreme climactic harshness, leading humanitarian organizations to rush to provide necessary life support systems that exceeded what would likely have developed in the location in other circumstances. The small settlement of some hundreds of inhabitants at Bahai, 25 kms south of the camp, was quickly dwarfed by the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees in the camp. The ethnic homogeneity of the camp population - virtually 100% from the Zagawa group that lives in the area on both sides of the border - and the relationships between camp residents and members of the armed group Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) meant that very quickly the camp became everything the humanitarian community generally seeks to avoid - politicized, militarized, and a place of recruitment, including of child soldiers.

ATTEMPTS AT SOLUTION

¶3. (SBU) UNHCR has sought the camp's relocation from the early days of its existence. At each suggestion that it move, the residents made clear that they had no intention of cooperating with such plans. The longer the move was resisted, the more camp structures and services were established to ensure the survival of the refugees - health clinics for each of the three camp blocs, a hospital at Bahai to take referrals of illnesses and injuries too serious for the clinics, a system of referral and transport to the surgical hospital in Iriba, primary school systems, food and non-food item distributions, and most critically a relatively complex water pumping and treatment plant supplying large volumes of potable water. State/PRM is currently managing funding for some two-thirds of all camp costs, through the USG contribution to UNHCR and annual cooperative agreements with the NGO International Rescue Committee (IRC) - over \$3

NDJAMENA 00000447 002.5 OF 004

million per year.

¶4. (SBU) Residents began to construct more durable shelters as the original tents and plastic sheeting structures wore out. Residents opposed more and more strenuously the repeated attempts to identify a new site far from the border to relocate the camp as it became more and more entrenched at the Oure Cassoni site. Most importantly, although the GoC offered a number of suggestions for where the camp should move, UNHCR found each of them untenable: there was no water to sustain the large camp population. At no time did the GoC throw its weight and authority behind a move; at no time did the residents or the JEM fighters believe that they would be pressured to move by anyone other than the humanitarian community.

VOLTE FACE

¶5. (SBU) The GoC on 14 September convoked UNHCR, MINURCAT, and a group of key humanitarian organization representatives to announce to them that the Oure Cassoni camp must be relocated without further delay, to an area around the settlement of Bir Douan. The area is just barely 45 kms west from Bahai and Oure Cassoni. UNHCR has expressed resentment at the implication that they had somehow not been sufficiently enthusiastic in the past when suggestions for moving the camp had been made, and calls attention to the refusals of camp residents to cooperate while the GoC presented both untenable relocation sites, while not making it clear to camp residents that they must distance themselves from the border. Longtime observers note that in fact UNHCR never seemed to press the issue hard enough, and suggest that if indeed best practices militate for not creating camps within 50 km of the border, UNHCR both failed to adhere to this guideline, and should have exerted a lot more pressure subsequently to get it moved.

WATER IS THE KEY

¶6. (SBU) RefCoord joined UNHCR, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Program's (WFP) representatives, accompanied by MINURCAT'S UN POL Chief of Police and General Adoum of the GoC's "CONAFIT" (National Coordination for the Support of the International Force in Eastern Chad) on 09 October for a site visit to Bir Douan. IO and NGO representatives working in Oure Cassoni met the team at the site and briefed on its viability. Water is, as always, the critical factor. Bir Douan (geocoords:

15.501160, 022.433783 as determined by RefCoord on a hand-held satellite phone), population 405 souls according to the settlement's elders, accesses water through deep - sometimes tens of meters - hand-dug catchments in dried stream beds, as well as from two deep boreholes served by hand pumps. The boreholes are 120 ms deep, roughly 0.5 kms apart, with a static water depth of 15 ms. Water quality is good, according to NGO hydrologists.

¶7. (SBU) Water clearly exists, but significant questions remain:

- Do the existing boreholes access a water pocket (non refilling) or an aquifer (potentially a sustainable source for tens of thousands of camp dwellers)?
- Can boreholes access water supplies in the areas where the camp blocs can be physically located?
- If yes, what is the potential output capacity of what would be a system of new boreholes in the areas considered for the three camp blocs?

¶8. (SBU) UNHCR has committed to answering these questions by Friday, 16 October. The agency believes that if the answers are not favorable to relocating the camp to Bir Douan, the GoC will find another area for the move: it is now conventional wisdom that the GoC has decided that Oure Cassoni must move, no matter what.

NDJAMENA 00000447 003.4 OF 004

WILL THEY GO?

¶9. (SBU) RefCoord's discussions with NGO and IO staff working in Oure Cassoni indicate that camp resident opposition to relocation is weaker than at previous times when the subject has arisen. There appears to be a certain resignation to the move, despite strong discomfort expressed particularly among women with the prospect of up-rooting, given the expectation that they will leave the durable shelters they have built over the years for more months under tents and plastic sheeting, and more hard labor constructing new shelters.

¶10. (SBU) IO and NGO staff report that camp residents react in different manners depending upon the group context in which questions on the move are posed. Camp leaders in particular express strong resistance to the move when in the company of their constituencies, but in private sometimes state that they are in favor of the move and will work to convince constituencies to cooperate. IO and NGO staff have noted this behavior especially in discussions with camp leaders believed to be closely allied to the JEM. In general, it appears that residents are quite clear that for the first time, the GoC has determined to push ahead with the move; they state that they expect that the GoC will eventually take action to destroy the Oure Cassoni camp infrastructure, making a move essentially non-voluntary on their part if they intend to continue to enjoy the status of refugee in Chad.

WHY NOW?

¶11. (SBU) Much speculation has circulated among the IO and NGO community as to why, this time, the GoC has put its weight and political prestige behind the relocation of this camp. The GoC has stated (Ref B and previous) that its goals include moving the JEM from the immediate border area, as a signal to Khartoum that the GoC is acting in good faith to hinder JEM operations in Sudan. Still, the Bir Douan relocation site does not meet best practices in terms of distance from a border to provide for a buffer from militarization of the camp; IO and NGO staff report that it is a relatively easy one-hour drive from Bir Douan to the border, insufficient to impose much operational hardship on the JEM with their machinegun-mounted "technical" 4X4 pick-ups. IO and NGO staff note that, in any case, the Oure Cassoni population is seen to be already heavily politicized and militarized, so moving the camp now would not address these problems.

¶12. (SBU) SRSG Victor Angelo, in his September briefing to the diplomatic corps, answered questions about the possibility that moving the camp as proposed by the GoC would in fact play into the hands of the JEM, given that Bir Douan is a short 20 kms from Am Jarras, a suspected JEM base and President Idriss Deby Itno's home town. Angelo asserted that the UN would do what it could to make sure than any move of the Oure Cassoni camp did not have unintended consequences, particularly with respect to JEM strength. But it remains the case that Bir Douan would offer good cell phone coverage from the towers of Am Jarras, the only town of significant size for many kilometers around. Indeed, CONAFIT's General Adoum has repeatedly drawn attention to this fact, telling RefCoord, IOs and NGOs that there would be no possible logistical or security problems associated with the move, because the President himself had insisted on it, as well as on the Bir Douan location.

¶13. (SBU) Thus international humanitarians and others also speculate that the Bir Douan location has been chosen to maximize the economic benefits that would accrue to the populations living in close proximity to the camp, which include Deby relatives. (NOTE: The President spent considerable time "on family business" in the vicinity of Am Jarras at the end of Ramadan last month, during which he reportedly "resolved disputes" and "arranged prizes" among members of his tribe. END NOTE.) The WFP representative reports that the GoC has been in regular contact with him and

NDJAMENA 00000447 004.4 OF 004

his predecessor, seeking to convince him to construct a major logistics and freight transit center in Am Jarras, in order to re-direct humanitarian food deliveries away from the southern route from Douala through Cameroon, and toward the Benghazi, Libya route into northeastern Chad and passing through Am Jarras. The WFP representative states that the GoC believes large convoys should come into Chad on Libyan trucks, which would transfer cargos to Chadian carriers at the new logistics center for onward delivery to refugee and IDP camps throughout the east.

¶14. (SBU) IO and NGO staffs residing in Bahai and working in Oure Cassoni state that they have also been approached about moving their offices and residences to Am Jarras in order to serve the new cap location at Bir Douan. Staffs note that whilerelocation of offices is not strictly necessary fo effective access to the Bir Douan location, and ould certainly impose significant expenses on thir organizations, moving to Am Jarras would give their operations somewhat better infrastructure, and provide for a slightly shorter drive to access the camp.

BUDGET AND TIMELINE

¶15. (SBU) UNHCR posits the following tentative sequence of events, should the Bir Douan site be determined to be viable:

-- Multi-sectoral studies (water, sanitation, agriculture, security, telecoms) - Present through mid-October --
Senstization of camp residents - Present through end-December
-- Boreholes and water point development - mid-October
through mid-December -- Site Planning - beginning November -
end-December -- Site development - Beginning November -
end-December -- MOVE - mid-December until complete
(approximately 1,000 persons per day, for roughly 28,000 people)

UNHCR's current cost estimate for the move: \$ 9.4 million, although some ongoing contracts for services in Oure Cassoni can be transferred to the new site, and non-food items in stock would likely reduce the need for entirely new funds.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) No one but the GoC appears wedded to the Bir Douan relocation site at present, although the GoC's desire to move the camp here and not somewhere else may in the end prevail should the site prove viable for life support. The diplomatic community is generally supportive of a move that would achieve the objective of disrupting JEM operations, although far from persuaded that Bir Douan is the right site for that. As noted, refugees themselves have strong views, but these do not appear to have entered into the political calculus of anyone planning the camp move.

NIGRO